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Potential Issues of Skin Fairness Creams TV advertisements in Pakistan

Sohail Kamran

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore the potential product performance and social issues caused by Fairness creams Television advertisements in Pakistan. Qualitative data was gathered from the female university students and gilrs from low socio economic backgrounds in Rawalpindi (19-28 years, n=96) through twelve focus group interviews. Firstly; study results suggest that fairness creams television ads overstate the product benefits. Some respondents revealed face skin problems after the usage of fairness creams. Secondly; study findings suggest that roles shown in the commercials are potentially reinforcing and raising negative values in the society, show stereo type roles of the women and hurt self esteem of women. These TV ads need to be regulated and the best possible way in the absence of any other types of consumer protection laws are the industry's self regulations. Policy implications include restriction on the distribution of fairness creams through medical stores only and roles such as girl marrying and wearing large quantity of gold jewelry, avoiding deceptive claims, change of face complexion within few days from dark to white after cream use, showing the superiority, status, achievement and beauty through white face skin should not be shown in the commercials, because of their negative effects on the society as a whole.

Keywords

Issues of fairness creams ads, Deceptive advertising

1. Introduction

There is a common liking for white face skin in the South Asian countries. Fair skin especially in the female segment of south Asian countries suggests superiority and beauty. The trend of using the fairness creams among the South Asians has emerged in the last fifty years. This need of being whitish has been exploited by the producers of skin whitening creams (Goon, 2003). Skin whitening cream manufacturers show fair skin in their advertisements as a necessity for success, and promote the use of their product to achieve the ideal face, partner, desired behavior from the society and attention from the opposite sex (Shankar et al, 2006).

There are different types of TV ads of fairness creams, which now a days are being shown on different TV channels of Pakistan. Some of the fairness creams TV ads and roles shown are being discussed below briefly to facilitate the understanding of the readers about the issues.

(a) A Young girl is worried about her dark face skin. She used a fairness cream and became pale with in few days. (b) A poor dark color gipsy girl used the skin whitening cream became white and then a rich boy got married with that poor gipsy girl.(c) A college girl with tan color used the fairness cream, which made her face skin white. She received approval from female friends and opposite sex. (d) A young girl was worried because of her dark skin. She used a skin whitening cream, which changed her dark color to white. After that, she is shown as a bride, wearing too much gold jewelry on her wedding day. (e) A boy denied marrying a girl, because of her dark face skin color. The same girl used a fairness cream, became pale with in few days and then same boy married with that girl, because of her fair white face skin. (f) A girl changed her face skin from dark to white within three days after the use of a fairness cream.

Although there is a great use of these fairness creams manufactured by both local and multinational companies, but issues of product performance are still common among the users. Most of these fairness creams are nonprescription products, and generally targeted to the young female population of the society through TV commercials (Shankar et al, 2006). Different groups of academicians and journalists in Bangladesh have expressed concerns about the dangerous effects of skin fairness cream usage and its advertisements. Islam et al, (2006) maintain that common skin whitening chemicals are linked with negative side effects for the face skin. Skin whitening creams cannot be useful without the use of skin bleaching chemicals such as steroids, mercury salts, hydroquinone and other skin damaging chemicals (Islam et al, 2006). Head of the Department of Dermatology in All India Institute of Medical Sciences in Delhi, Dr. R.K. Pandhi, stated that he has never come across a medical study that validates the claims of skin whitening by applying skin creams (Sinha, 2000).

Personal, Social, and ideal body image should be seriously debated, which are caused by the marketing of these fairness creams (Shankar et al, 2006). For a long time large social and economic issues have been raised concerning the role of advertising in the society (Batra et al, 2005). False claims and promises about the product through marketing communications could be categorized as unethical marketing practice (Kotler & Armstrong, 2001). One of the basic areas of advertising regulation is deception and unfair advertising. Three primary groups consumers, industry and government may play their roles to regulate advertising practices (O'Guinn et al, 2003).

Consumers complaining behavior can be categorized in to three main categories. Firstly; voice response to the party directly involved in the complaint, secondly; negative word of mouth or brand switching by the customers, and thirdly; legal actions. Due to the varying personal concepts, perceptions of others and level of social activity, consumers across cultures are expected to vary with respect to complaining behavior. Those consumers with the collectivistic national culture as compared to the individualistic societies are less likely to voice complaints, when they experience post purchase problem (Mooij, 2004). Uneducated consumers are less likely to complain in case of post purchase dissatisfaction (Lindquist & Sirgy, 2003).

Ads have been widely criticized on being unethical and issues such as mis-

informing, misleading, making false promises, creating undesirable demands, making false promises, lowering the dignity of women, influencing disadvantaged target groups and defaming any individual or class of persons have been raised quite frequently (Sekhar, 1999).

Marketing communications may hurt the personal feelings. A survey of 1,000 adults carried out by the center for advertising studies, University of Illinois's Cummings, found that 51 percent of consumers feel that they are insulted by marketing communications "sometimes or often", 47% consumers consider that the majority of brand messages insult their intelligence and that 67% think they are occasionally misled by any marketing message (Shavitt et al, 1998). There is an accusation on advertising that it has contributed to the role stereotyping of women and ethnic minorities. This has been supported by numerous studies. In 729 advertisements appearing in 1970, none showed women in a professional capacity, where as 35 of them so showed men. The author concluded that advertisements reflected the stereotype that women do not perform important things, are dependent on men, are regarded by men primarily as sex objects, and should be in the home (Courtney & Lockeretz, 1971).

The United Nations, UNESCO Organization arranged a sixteen members commission to study the "Totality of communication problems in modern society". The commission's report, which is called as the Mac Bride Report (named after the Irish diplomat Sean McBride who led the commission). The commission produced eighty two recommendations directed mainly at the possible dangers of advertising and the needs for controls on advertising practices. As it was anticipated, the reactions to the report were extremely polarized with support largely coming from the third world countries and opposition coming from industry representatives in developed nations. Three main issues, which attracted particular attention, were (a) the role that advertising has played in creating harmful stereotypes of women and ethnic minorities, (b) the possible contribution of advertising in promoting harmful products and, (c) the relationship of advertising to materialism (Singh & Gross, 1981).

Values are among the first things children learn unconsciously, but implicitly. Development psychologists consider that by the age of 10, majority of the children have their basic value systems definitely in place (Mooiji, 2004). A study conducted by Thomas Lipscomb on boys and girls of the first, third, fifth and seventh grades revealed that materialism tends to be developed earlier in boys than girls and that elder children speak about consumer products to considerably greater degree than younger children (Lipscomb, 1998). It is argued that advertising has an impact on the values and lifestyles of the society and that advertising impacts both negative and positive sides (Batra et al, 2005). Myers (1972) states that key issues are that, which values and lifestyles are to be encouraged as positive, which are to be avoided, and what relative impact or influence advertising has on the society? Regardless of their complexity and their association to deep philosophical questions, they are well worth addressing to illuminate judgments and assumptions about our market system and society that are too often glossed over (Myers, 1972).

1.1 Objectives of the Study

Although there is a growing body of literature on advertising ethics (Dean, 2005), but there was no research, which specifically addressed the potential product performance and social issues caused by the fairness creams television commercials in Pakistan. Skin fairness creams are used by the female population in the south Asian countries, but there is a dearth of published literature about the product performance, its side effects, social, personal and economic issues caused by the marketing of these creams. These types of issues remain unaddressed because consumer concerns are rarely debated in these countries. So the main objectives of this paper are as follows:

1) To explore the potential product performance issues of the skin whitening creams.

2) To examine that how the roles shown in the fairness creams TV commercials potentially reinforce and raise social issues in Pakistan?

2. Methodology

The current exploratory study was carried out by using qualitative research approach. The study took place in Rawalpindi city, Pakistan. The units of data collection were obtained from female students of a University and three vicinities of Rawalpindi city. Focus Group Discussions (FGD's) were conducted for the data collection in both research arenas (University & Vicinities). Firstly, University students of all undergraduate and postgraduate programs were informed about the study and all the previous and current users of the fairness creams were requested to participate in the focus groups. For the University students focus groups were conducted within the University setting, during the university timings and in a large room, which had a quite peaceful environment (Guinard, 2001, Burns & Bush, 2000). Secondly, three Key Informants were selected to approach poor and illiterate gilrs living in the three vicinities of Rawalpindi city. Participants from the community were screened by using socio-economic census survey form and FGD's were conducted at the homes of Key Informants selected from the community. Girls from low socio-economic background were selected to know their attitude and views about the fairness creams and their TV commercials.

The population age was ranged from 19-28 years. This population age group was chosen because of the fact that the fairness creams are generally targeted and used by the young girls. The target customers for skin fairness creams are mainly 18-35 old women (Srisha, 2001).

A total of 96 females participated in the study. Sixty Four participants were University students (64 Participants, 67%) and Thirty Two participants were from the three vicinities of Rawalpindi (32 Participants, 33%). Participants were asked to watch the fairness creams TV advertisements one week prior to the conducting of the focus groups. TV commercials were also shown and discussed with the participants before the start of each focus group. Each participant had worn the name tag, which helped the moderator of the focus groups to call each participant by name (Hair et al, 2006). Each of the participants was asked to speak one by one to participate in the discussion. This helped to make sure that every one is participating and expressing their views. Participants were divided in to twelve focus groups and each group comprised of eight members. Because a group with less than eight participants is not likely to produce the energy and group dynamics necessary for truly beneficial focus group session (Burns & Bush, 2000).

All focus groups were conducted by the same moderator and each focus group on the average lasted about 45 minutes. All the focus groups discussions were audio recorded with the permission of the participants, which helped to analyze the information gathered during the study (Burns & Bush, 2000). To maintain the uniformity moderator guide was prepared, which outlined the topics, questions and sub questions used by the moderator to run the focus group sessions properly. Recorded interviews of 9.5 hours were written down word by word to create the man-

uscripts. Content Analysis Approach was used to analyze the data (Hair et al, 2006).

2.1 Limitations of the study

This study was carried out in general about the fairness creams product performance issues; however, any single brand or specific brands were not discussed with the participants. So directions for the future research may be firstly: to explore the product performance issues about a specific brand or brands of fairness creams. Secondly; this study was conducted with a small sample size through focus group discussions. The same type of study may be conducted with a large sample size by using different methodology and at a different location.

3. Results

The main topics explored from the focus groups participants are categorized in the following themes.

(ii) Product performance problems
(iii) Reinforcing and raising negative values in the society
(iv) Stereotype roles of Women
(v) Hurting the self esteem of the girls

3.1 Product Performance Issues

According the question that whether these creams improve the skin color in reality, participants revealed that (89%, 85 responses), what is claimed in the TV commercials of fairness creams is never true and product do not deliver. (… They lie that fairness creams make face white…- Undergraduate student). (…It is just a waste of money…- Poor House wife). Some respondents (44%, 42 respondents) feel that continuous use of the fairness cream can bring freshness in the face skin, but does not make face skin white. According to (67 %, 64 respondents), these fairness creams could cause skin problems, if not used properly or without the advise of a beautician. However, (56%, 54 respondents) have experienced the skin problems after the use of skin whitening creams, such as itchiness, rashes, dryness, pimples, hardness and darkness of the face skin. (…I experienced irritation on my face after applying the cream… after few days some pimples were appeared on my face…-Postgraduate student). (… After two weeks of cream use, I experienced stiffness on my face skin… Shop Sales Girl).

None of the participants of the focus groups used the medicated fairness cream. Further only (4%, 4 respondents) of those, who experienced the skin problems complained to the retailers. On a question that from, where do they buy the skin whitening creams? Respondents purchased it from the small or large grocery shops located near to their home (88%, 85 respondents).

3.2 Reinforcing and raising negative values in the society

Girls believe that the roles shown in the fairness creams TV advertisements are potentially reinforcing and raising negative values, such as materialism, dominance of white face skin, and negative effects on the youth thinking. TV commercials present white skin superiority and as criterion of judging female beauty, which has been negatively affecting the ethical considerations in the matrimonial matters (…Boy's parents demand white skin girl for their son…-A poor girl). Furthermore, in most of the advertisements, model girls are shown marrying and wearing gold ornaments. Respondents stated that these types of advertisements have a great potential of increasing the materialism in the society (72%, 69 respondents). (…We can only dream about the dresses and jewelry shown in the TV {fairness creams} commercials…- A housemaid).

Respondents perceive that these ads are negatively affecting the thinking and approach toward life in the kids and adolescent group of the society. They are becoming more materialistic, idealistic, and beauty or skin color conscious in the teenage. Participants reported that they have witnessed the negative effects of these skin whitening TV ads in their younger brothers, sisters or cousins etc (40%, 39 respondents). (…my younger sister, who is just 12 years old, buys skin whitening cream from her pocket money and is worried about her skin color…- Postgraduate student). (…My younger 16 years old sister uses fairness cream to become white…-A housemaid).

Respondents also reported the negative effects on the youth male segment of the society as well. One of the respondents said… My younger brother, who is 11 years old, says to her mother that I will marry with a white girl…- Undergraduate student).

3.3 Stereotype Roles of Women

Majority of the young female students believe that these advertisements show stereotype roles of the women in the society (87%, 84 respondents). Roles such as marrying, dreaming to marry a rich or handsome man, social approval of the young girls in the society and other house hold roles are always shown in the television advertisements. (…an educated woman of today is also involved in professional activities…but always traditional roles of the women are represented in the fairness television advertisement, which is very discouraging…- Postgraduate student). (…Girls are never shown as bread earners, infact we do earn…-Poor Girl)

3.4 Hurting the self esteem of the girls

Participants of the study believe that fairness cream TV advertisements play a vital role in hurting the self respect of the girls. After viewing the advertisements black or dark skin color girls could have the feelings of inferiority, social disapproval, lack of confidence, family and friends jokes aimed at their skin color, and other psychological problems. (70%, 67 respondents). (… My few class mates often say sarcastically to me to use fairness cream and it will make you white... I cannot confidently participate in the class discussion …- Undergraduate student). A girl said that (… I feel very oppressed when some people make jokes and pass comment on my face skin …which is very intimidating and disgraceful for me…- Postgraduate student). (… Street Boys often pass comments on my tan skin color…-An Illiterate poor girl).

4. Analysis and Discussion

Majority of the participants revealed that the fairness creams do not perform as claimed by the sellers through TV advertisements. As fairness creams advertisers always state that the cream use will make one white or fair within few days. In reality, it is impossible to change dark skin color to white with the use of a cream. Participants of the study also revealed that continuous use of the fairness cream made their face skin look fresh, but not white. Claims made by the manufacturers increase the expectations of the consumers and when the product actually does not deliver up to the expectations, it results in the consumers dissatisfaction. Therefore fairness creams sellers should claim only what their product can deliver.

Fairness creams advertised through television are non prescriptive products. Further they are sold at a low price, which perhaps communicates low quality and poor efficacy of the product (normally price of a cream tube falls in the bracket of 40

to 120 Pakistani Rupees, which is about US $0.50 to US $1.50). But the manufacturers keep claiming high quality and excellent results of their product. The question arises that, how the manufacturers are able to produce high quality creams by adding expensive ingredients in their products at such a low cost? As mostly, these creams are targeted to the lower and middle class female population, who do have fewer choices, less purchasing power and mostly either are illiterate or have very basic literacy skills. So the advertising messages of fairness cream could potentially exploit the target market very easily.

A fair number of the respondents believe that use of the creams could cause skin problems such as itchiness, rashes, dryness, pimples, hardness and darkness of the face skin. According to (Shankar et al, 2006) most of these creams are non prescriptive products and could potentially cause face skin problems. The information, which is totally missing in the TV commercials, is the precautions of using these fairness creams. In fact, it is vital to give information through TV ads and retailers about the product such as, skin suitability, quantity of use, frequency of use, time of use, precautions and contact information in case of the skin problem after the use. These misleading claims and lack of clarity in the information delivery by the sellers could well be classified as unethical advertising practice.

Majority of the respondents purchased the fairness creams from the small or large grocery shops. These grocery stores do not keep any specialized person or beautician to suggest the product use. In general retailers in Pakistan are either illiterate or have little literacy skills. So they are not in a position to understand and convey the written product information to the buyers.

Product manufacturers should include product usage information in their advertising messages. Secondly; in spite of selling the product from traditional retail stores, companies must restrict the distribution of their product to the medical stores only. Because the owners of the medical stores in Pakistan do have license to operate, normally have educated staff and can convey the product information to the consumers in their local language better than the conventional retailers. The other good reason of this proposal is the fact that a large majority of Pakistani population is illiterate. So it is impossible for majority of Pakistani consumers to understand the written product information included in the product pack.

As majority of the participants revealed that product do not perform as claimed in the TV commercials, but the question arises that despite the product failing to deliver and skin problems faced by some of the consumers, why consumer do not complain? According to (Mooij, 2004) dissatisfied consumers complaining behavior can be categorized as either voice response to the party directly involved in the complaint, negative word of mouth or legal action. In case of Pakistan, consumers may only spread unfavorable comments or negative word of mouth marketing. Consumers would normally not go for the legal action or complaining to any other concerned authority. There is a widespread illiteracy in Pakistan and as (Lindquist & Sirgy, 2003) maintain that consumers with less education or no education are less likely to involve themselves in any type of product complains. In general complaining about the product is not going to be beneficial, and may only result in the wastage of time, money and energy. So Pakistani consumers do not generally take any legal action in case of any unethical marketing practices mainly because of unawareness, widespread illiteracy, poverty, absence of the consumers groups and poor implementation of the commercial laws. The main cause of deceptive advertising and unethical business practices are the clear absence of consumer concerns in the judicial debate of Pakistan. (Khan & Hafeez, 1999). The complain procedures are expensive and lengthy which discourages the consumers to complain. This requires a complete legal and institutional framework to make sure speedy, inexpensive and appropriate consumer protection. Such framework is essential to restrict unfair business practices and to protect consumers in the market place (Humayun et al, 2000).

Most of the respondents commented those roles shown in the fairness creams TV commercials do have the potential of reinforcing and raising the negative values in the society among different age groups. Firstly, focus group participants commented that the roles shown can potentially increase the materialism. Most of the TV commercials of the fairness creams show that after applying the cream girl became white, marrying with a rich boy and girl wearing a lot of gold ornament in her wedding ceremony. According to (Batra et al, 2005), advertisements may effect the values and life styles of any society in both negative and positive way (Batra et al, 2005). According to (Singh & Gross, 1981) advertising could potentially promote materialism in the society. According to (Betra et al, 2005) advertising has the potential of promoting materialism, envy, insecurity, and selfishness in the society (Batra et al, 2005). In the long run the roles shown in TV commercials can potentially change society's values either towards negative or positive side. Roles shown in the TV commercials may also potentially reinforce the negative or positive behaviors and values in any society. As the role of girl in the wedding dress wearing too much gold jewelry potentially increases the materialism and greed in the society. Those girls, who are at economic and social disadvantage, might feel more deprived, as they can not acquire expensive jewelry and dresses. So fairness creams TV ads are strengthening the unwanted customs, perceptions, practices and values in the society. Some respondents from the low socio background mentioned that, expensive dresses and jewelry shown in the commercials are far behind their reach. It gives the idea that information about expensive products is being provided to the target audience through TV Ads, but the financial resources to acquire those material objects are not there. So these types of roles will potentially create anxiety among the economically disadvantaged female segment of the society.

According to most of the participants roles shows in the fairness creams TV commercial are negatively affecting the thinking of the kids and adolescent groups of the society. They are becoming more idealistic and skin color conscious. As almost all the kids and adolescents in the urban areas are exposed to these TV commercials on daily basis. Electronic media consumption and exposure has been increased significantly in the teenage group mainly because of two reasons. Firstly; Opening and availability of new private cable TV channels and secondly; lack of recreational and sports opportunities available to the youth in the urban areas of Pakistan. So viewing the roles and marketing messages, where white face skin of the girls are shown as a symbol of superiority motivate the teenage group to romanticize these roles and to buy the product even though it is not needed. Clearly roles shown in fairness creams TV commercials have a potential of affecting the teenage groups thinking and approach towards their lives negatively.

Majority of the Television commercials of the Fairness creams show the domestic roles of the women, such as marrying and attracting the opposite sex through the face skin. Participation of the urban female population is increasing in the education and employment activities, but still things need to be improved significantly. Women are never shown in the professional roles in the

TV commercials. Actually Pakistani society is fairly a conservative society and some educated women either are not motivated to participate in the economic activities or not permitted by the family members to do the job. Roles shown in the TV commercial potentially strengthen the perception of women domestic roles in the society, which is the stereotyping of the women as dependent, as a sex object and domestic roles as also mentioned by Courtney & Lockeretz (1971). These TV commercials are reinforcing the stereotype roles of the women and are not helpful to change the society's perception about women professional abilities. Therefore companies in their advertisements should show women in the professional roles, which might motivate the women to be a professional and might change the society's perceptions and behaviors about the professional women in the long run.

The participants commented that fairness creams television ads play a role in hurting their self respect and feelings. Most of the advertisements show that a black girl or a dark complexion girl changed her face complexion within few days after the use of the fairness cream. Actually most of these fairness cream advertisements messages have their ironic side as well, which is to show that use of fairness cream will change black skin to white with in few days. So those girls having the black skin color might have to face jokes, comments and sarcastic suggestions to use the whiteness creams for changing the skin color from few of their friends and class mates etc. These advertisements just focus on the white skin as the prime personality trait, but ignore all other aspects of the women personality, such as educational and professional achievements and intelligence etc. This study results are in concurrence with the findings of the study conducted by the center for advertising studies, University of Illinois's Cummings, which revealed that advertising messages and roles shown could well be source of humiliation for them (Shavitt et al, 1998).

In Pakistani likewise other societies the concept of beauty extends far beyond the physical appearance, where character, morality, ethics and education are considered equally important attributes of an individual's personality and beauty. Advent of modernization, media glamour, material culture and new beauty constructions have been influencing the above mentioned attributes negatively. Advertisements of fairness creams have given a new version of beauty, which totally negates the individual morality, moral standards and emphasized only on physical appearance. Fairness creams TV ads deliver messages to the Pakistani society that only white face skin is the necessity for success, intelligence, social approval and beauty. These types of messages could well be a source of humiliation for those, who are having black or dark complexion. So these messages could potentially hurt a great number of women population's feelings. Fairness creams seller need to understand that there is no universal definition of the beauty. Judgment of beauty differs from person to person and country to country. So the ads messages and roles deserve criticism because of promoting the white skin as a symbol of beauty in the South Asian countries, which is unattainable for the majority of the women population. But this could be a possible source of disgrace and lowering their dignity as majority of women do have Asian skin color.

5. Conclusion

This study qualitatively explored the potential product performance and social issues of Fairness creams television commercials in Pakistan. The study results show that fairness creams sellers overstate the product benefits, which actually are not delivered. Results showed congruity between the literate and illiterate, poor and middle class girls responses in terms of product performance and social issues raised by fairness creams TV Ads. The most basic ethical issue of fairness creams advertising is making false or misleading statements. Although Government, Consumers and Industry self regulations could be used to regulate these unethical advertising practices in Pakistan. But, Government interventions to regulate these marketing practices are mainly missing because of the absence of rules and regulations against deceptive advertising, raising the issues by consumers in front of government or regulatory bodies, absence of the consumer groups, widespread illiteracy and lack of awareness in the consumers about their rights in Pakistan. The only possibility is the industry's self regulation, which could work well to protect the consumers and society from the negative aspects of these advertisements. In the contemporary world most of the organizations talk about the corporate social responsibility, but in case of fairness creams television advertisements, there is a clear divergence between the social welfare and companies economic goals. Therefore, the issues of product performance need to be addressed by the manufacturers of these fairness creams to protect the consumers from possible skin and financial detriment. It is the right of the consumers to buy the cosmetic products like fairness creams, but at least they must be informed about the true product ingredients, use frequency, precautions, possible side effects and complain procedure etc. Secondly; the sellers must not make false promises about the product performance. Generally, public trust on the companies' product claims is very low, because often companies mislead the customers through marketing messages. So those companies which do not exaggerate their product benefits could get a position of an honest business in the mind of consumers and it could well be a source of competitive advantage for those companies making product claims, which are actually delivered. Thirdly, roles showing white face skin color superiority among the Asian cultures, girl marrying after applying the cream, house hold roles of the women need to be stopped in the TV commercials, because they could potentially reinforce and raise the negative values and customs in Pakistani society. Although, it can not be established that TV commercials are the only source of reinforcing the negative values and customs in the society, but electronic media is the strongest institute to transform any society's values from negative to positive and vice versa. Therefore, these fairness creams advertisers could play a vital role as a change agent in positive change process of Pakistani society. Perception and beliefs of the people about the white face skin superiority in the South Asian countries, women stereotype roles, and materialism could be changed by altering the message contents and roles in the fairness creams TV ads in Pakistan.

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